

Veterinary Specialists Inc.
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**OTITIS EXTERNA
(INFLAMMATION/INFECTION OF THE EXTERNAL EAR)**

Otitis externa is inflammation of the ear- more specifically it is inflammation of the external ear canal. Ear disease usually presents itself in the form of redness, swelling, and external ear pain. Animals with ear disease often scratch excessively at the ear opening, shake their head, or rub their ears on the floor. The inside of the ears are red, have excessive amount of wax, and may exhibit a strong odor. Ear disease is usually gradual in onset with only slight discomfort in the early stages. Later the disease becomes painful with very noticeable symptoms.

Common primary causes of ear disease include ear mites, foreign objects (e.g. grass awns), masses, internal disease (e.g. Cushings or hypothyroidism) or allergies. Allergies are the most frequent cause of itching and redness in the ears. These problems lead to bacterial or yeast infections. Bacterial and yeast infections are usually a secondary problem. Small ear canals, large ear flaps, or skin folds and excessive wax production or excessive water in the ears can be predisposing or contributing factors to ear disease.

Once the ear is red and swollen, a bacterial or yeast infection develops. These infections perpetuate the disease by producing more redness, swelling, pain and wax production. With continued ear disease, the ear canal becomes thickened; causing a restriction in the opening, and treatment becomes difficult. In some animals the ear cartilage changes into bone, which results in irreversible obstructive disease in the ear canal. In these situations, surgical intervention is almost always necessary.

Treatment of the ear disease involves not only medication but also identification and control of the primary factors such as allergies, foreign bodies, parasites, or internal diseases. Identifying the underlying cause can take time and a variety of diagnostic tests. It is important to find the cause or the ear infection can worsen and spread farther into the ear (i.e. the middle ear). The goal in ear therapy is to control the underlying problem and return the ear canal to normal.

If wax or discharge is present, routine cleaning will be necessary to remove it. Ear medication can not penetrate the wax or discharge, so ear cleaners are used to dissolve the wax/debris, kill the microorganisms, and dry the ear canal. Sometimes it may be necessary to sedate the animal and thoroughly flush the ear; this should be done by the veterinarian.

Some animals will require routine ear cleaning to maintain normal ear health. This is most likely in breeds with restricted ear canals, in animals with permanent changes from chronic disease, and in animals with abnormally narrow or waxy canals.

REMEMBER: THE GOAL IN TREATING THE EAR IS TO RESOLVE THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND TO RETURN THE EAR CANAL TO NORMAL.